

Focus on Fiber: Portland

July 1st, 2010 by talia

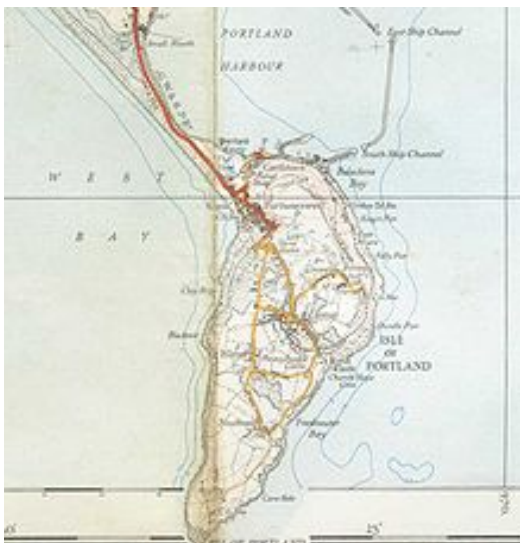


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Introduction:

My first introduction to the Portland breed was rather recent. Although I must have read about their lovely wool in Jane and Nola Fournier's book, **In Sheep's Clothing**, it apparently had little impact on me. My love for this breed started when perusing the book **Beautiful Sheep** by Kathryn Dun. There he is on page 49, a magnificent long tailed Portland ram. The title of the book says it all, "Beautiful!" I was determined to spin some of this breed's down wool. The Portland sheep is a breed that was rescued from the brink of extinction and is currently listed as "At Risk" by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust of the UK. The hunt was on! Fortune favored my efforts as I not only was able to buy the fleece from a whole flock but the producer's husband had written a book on Portland sheep called **Portland Sheep: A Breed with a History**. My dreams that had started with a picture had now come to fruition. Portland wool is here.

History of The Breed:



Map of Portland Island from 1937, from Wikipedia

The Isle of Portland is a land-tied island that is in the southern most part of Dorset County. The terrain is known for its craggy and dramatic rock structures and strategic position in the English Channel. Yet this wind swept isle was the only home to the Portland sheep for centuries. It is thought that the Portland is most likely related to the South West Horned sheep, which later developed into the Dorset Horn and Wiltshire Horn, but the Portland has remained a primitive, distinct breed due to the isolation of its home.



Page from the Domesday Book, Wikipedia

The first record of Portland sheep is in William the Conqueror’s **Domesday Book**, which is a survey of England from 1086. Portland Isle was listed as having 900 sheep. Although there were agricultural fairs to sell stock, the difficulty of ferrying animals to the mainland plus the facts that the sheep produce generally one lamb at a time and have a small carcass, assured that the Isle of Portland would remain the home of our friendly sheep. The commercial uses of the Portland were more for their wool, milk, and cheese even though King George III preferred the superior flavor of its meat.

In 1840, Portland sheep reached its highest population with 4000 sheep. Their decline was partially due to increased quarrying for valuable limestone, loss of grazing land to housing needs, and failure to breed successful crosses to increase carcass size. By 1913, the last of the flocks were barely sold at auction.

The Portland sheep was on its way to extinction when the Rare Breeds Survival Trust became involved. They registered 86 breeding ewes in all of the UK. An effort was made to save the breed and they have now been upgraded to “At Risk” with an increase of breeding ewes numbering 1500.

Breed Characteristics:



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As discussed before, the Portland sheep is on the small side with ewes weighing in at 30 – 40 kg. They are born with a lovely “foxy red” color which faded in a few months to a creamy color. Their heads and legs are generally tan. Both sexes are horned with the rams’ horns being more dramatic and spiraled and the ewes ending in a half circle. They are a long tailed sheep and can lamb out of season, which indicates a relationship to Mediterranean breeds.

The Wool:



Just waiting to be spun!

Portland sheep produce down wool that is soft, somewhat springy with excellent loft. Fleeces weigh between 3 – 6 lbs. with a staple length of 3-5 inches average. The fibers have a micron

count of 26 – 31 and a Bradford Count of 56s – 50s. Portland wool takes dye very well. The wool has a wonderful, primitive quality yet gives the impression that it is suited for royal garments. In short, it lends itself to the imagination and creative musings of the artist.

Resources:

British Wool Marketing Board, British Sheep Breeds: Their Wool and Its Uses, 1984, 84pp

Dun, Kathryn, Beautiful Sheep: Portraits of Champion Breeds, 2008, Thomas Dunne Books, 112pp, ISBN-13: 978-0312385125

Fournier, Nola and Jane, S, In Sheep's Clothing, A Handspinners Guide to Wool, 1995, Interweave Press, Loveland, CO, 222p, Hardback (ISBN 1-883010-11-X)

Jones, Norman, Portland Sheep: A Breed with a History, 2009, Norman Jones, UK, 182pp, ISBN: 0-9545981-0-5

Wikipedia, Isle of Portland, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isle_of_Portland#Geography, Retrieved on July 1, 2010.

Wikipedia, Domesday Book, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domesday_Book, Retrieved on July 1, 2010.

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